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11. Summary. (SBU) Recent opinion polls indicate that eight of the 21 parties running in the June 17 elections will gain the five percent of valid votes cast required to enter parliament. SMER-Social Democracy leads the polls with more than 30 percent support. The next highest party, either SKDU or HZDS depending on the poll, does not exceed 12 percent support. Any coalition is likely, therefore, to involve at least three political parties. The 2006 campaign has been less showy and bombastic than in previous election years, largely because candidates are unwilling to offend rivals with whom they might have to form a coalition after election day. It is difficult to make predictions on post-election coalitions, but if SMER comes within 5 percent of its current polling results, it will likely be part of the future government. PM Dzurinda's job is more difficult. To keep SMER out it seems he would have to resurrect his coalition as it looked before the Christian Democrats left, and might have to include Vladimir Meciar's HZDS. The post-election day "mathematics" of coalition formation will be at least as important as the vote itself. End summary

WHO WILL BE IN PARLIAMENT AFTER JUNE 17?

12. (U) Political parties are busy campaigning in preparation for the fast-approaching June 17 parliamentary elections. Recent political polls suggest, however, that the campaign has not significantly influenced voter preferences, which have remained quite stable for the past several months.

13. (SBU) These are the eight parties that are most likely to reach parliament:

SMER-Social Democracy, headed by Robert Fico, has consistently polled in the 30 to 34 percent range throughout the year; last week's poll listed them at 31.7 percent. In 2002, SMER was polling in the 20-25 percent range but dropped sharply in the last month before election day and finally gained just 13.46 percent of valid votes cast. Some observers have predicted a similar scenario this year, although the party appears better organized, has presented a more moderate image and has been more willing to leave its options open regarding future partners. Most observers expect it to do considerably better than in 2002, but not to reach its current polling percentage. SMER would consider 25 percent or better to be a victory. Minister Kukan of SDKU told the Ambassador he expects SMER to come in with at least 22 percent.

HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia), led by former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, received the highest percentage of valid votes cast in 2002, 19.5 percent. This year HZDS has

consistently polled in the second or third position, with 10 - 11.5 percent support, and that support has stabilized over the past year. After being shut out of the previous government, Meciar has tried to sound like a middle-of-the road politician in order that the other major parties will view HZDS as an acceptable coalition partner. Meciar seems most inclined to work with the current ruling coalition parties (SDKU and SMK) and KDH, although HZDS has only ruled out cooperation with the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS).

SDKU (Party of Democratic and Christian Union) of PM Mikulas Dzurinda is now polling between 9 and 11 percent and is running on its record of reform. SDKU is the party expected to gain most from a low voter turnout and the tendency of many Slovaks to make up their mind in the voting booth. In 2002 SDKU surprised most observers by coming out with 15.1 percent of valid votes cast despite months of polls that put its support in the 10 percent range. SDKU's natural coalition partners are SMK and KDH, although the personal animosity between the leaders of SDKU and KDH resulting from the collapse of the government in February would have to be gently finessed.

SMK (Party of the Hungarian Coalition) has the most stable polling numbers of any party at around 10 percent which, not coincidentally, is also the estimated percentage of Slovakia's citizens who claim Hungarian nationality. SMK has been a stable coalition partner and has shown interest in a renewed coalition with SDKU. That said, SMK is quite flexible and is considered a possible coalition partner for SMER as well. SMK has ruled out participating in a government only with KSS or SNS.

KDH (Christian Democratic Movement), which is polling around 9.5 percent, pulled out of the GOS coalition in February 2006, but would be willing to continue in some way with its former coalition partners. It strictly rejects cooperation with

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Meciar, but not with his party, HZDS. Some of its most prominent members do not want the party to join a SMER-led coalition but political realities will keep this option open.

SNS (Slovak National Party), which does not currently hold seats in parliament due to fracturing in 2002, is more united and its popularity surged again in 2005. It now polls around 8 percent. Its controversial and nationalist leader, Jan Slota, has indicated that he is ready to cooperate with SMER or HZDS, but SMER has not indicated any interest in working with SNS. Unfortunately, recent polling surveys indicate that none of the major parties - with the sole exception of SMK - have ruled out cooperation with SNS. Even top members of SDKU have noted that giving Slota a ministry is not much different than what was done with Pavol Rusko of ANO.

SF (Free Forum) is the new party of former SDKU MP Zuzana Martinakova. While not dramatically different than SDKU in her philosophy, Martinakova's harsh criticism of PM Dzurinda suggests that any future alliance with SDKU is unlikely. The party now polls at 6.0 percent, but has weakened slightly in recent weeks due to internal dissension and is not a sure bet to make it into parliament.

KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia) currently holds seats in parliament. By its own admission, however, the party has little to offer voters since it is an unacceptable partner for all the other major parties. KSS has been polling at a low but consistent 5.5 percent, and voter turnout will determine whether they can hold onto a minimum number of seats in Parliament.

FORM AND SUBSTANCE CHANGE FROM PREVIOUS ELECTIONS

14. (U) The elections are regulated by a law passed in 2004, which addresses concerns raised in previous elections. The law provides for elections to be held over the course of one

day, as opposed to two days as was done in the past, and allows for votes by mail. Three weeks before the election private TV and radio stations can broadcast political advertisements under the same conditions as the public media. Election campaigns and advertising can continue through election day; however, poll results must not be published after the polls open. Parties have no limits on how much they can spend on their campaigns.

15. (U) The new law did not change Slovakia's weak electoral districting system. In all polling stations across the country, voters choose from an identical set of 21 lists (one for each political party) of 150 candidates (one for each seat in Parliament). This lowers the accountability of candidates and decreases the public's desire to participate. Lists of party candidates are chosen by party convention rather than by voters. In addition to a vote for a party, each voter can also pick up to four "preferential candidates" from the respective party list. The role of voters was notably strengthened in this regard by lowering the threshold for preferential votes from 10 to 3 percent. (In the last election, only one candidate was able to get to parliament thanks to preferential votes.) Thus, if a party gets 100,000 votes, a candidate with at least 3,000 votes would move to the top of the list (rank-ordered by preferential votes), even if the party had put him/her towards the bottom of the list. This fact could motivate candidates to run their own personal campaigns, in addition to the official ones with party election leaders.

A MORE 'NORMAL' CAMPAIGN

16. (U) Unlike the 2002 elections that were dominated by Slovakia's integration efforts to both NATO and EU, the 2006 elections have had a different focus, a struggle between the center-right parties currently in power, which are running largely on the strength of their economic reforms, and the left-of-center SMER, which promises to enact a more socially minded agenda. SMER has not called for a complete overhaul of the current government's reforms, but has focused on areas such as the privatization of health care services, where public opinion clearly is against the government.

17. (SBU) Though the official media campaign (TV and radio advertisements) begins on May 27, Slovakia is already covered with billboards and political leaders have been on the campaign trail for more than two months. That said, the 2006 campaign has been noticeably less showy and less bombastic than in previous years. It is widely believed that parties are "playing nice" so that they can keep all options open for post-election negotiations with as few limitations as possible. In addition there is no extensive anti-Meciar, pro-

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democracy NGO mobilization this time.

18. (SBU) Voters have responded to moderation with apathy - important in an election whose result may depend heavily on turnout. This could be the crucial factor of the election, since many parties have similar polling numbers but very different levels of core support. In current opinion polls, approximately 60 percent of voters say they will vote, which is significantly lower than the 70 percent turnout in 2002 and 84 percent participation rate in 1998. Many observers expect participation rates to be lower, likely in the low to mid 50s. The head of the Election Department Livia Skultetyova told us recently that her estimate of voter turnout is 60 percent, and she firmly believes in the impartiality of the election and the processing of the results. She reacted viscerally to Fico's recently voiced suspicion that results might be manipulated, noting that even Meciar did not raise such charges in the past.

APPROVAL RATINGS UP, BUT IS ELECTORATE LOOKING FOR CHANGE?

¶9. (U) Based on a survey by the center-right Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) from May 2006, the general perception of the public is less pessimistic than before. Almost half of the population believes that the country is heading in the right direction, which is high for Slovaks, who are renowned for seeing the glass as half-empty. A majority of the population asserts that reforms (tax, decentralization, pension, social benefits) had been positive to a significant degree, although changes are required to minimize negative impacts of the reforms. The exception is health care reform, which was rejected outright by 72 percent of respondents. Few voters, however, unequivocally endorse the reforms - only about 10 percent strongly support tax, pension, and social benefit reform. Interestingly, opinions on government policy performance do not differ dramatically by party affiliation, except for SDKU voters, who are much more positive.

¶10. (U) IVO predicts the gap between preferences and actual election results of SMER will be much smaller than in the 2002 elections; the election results are estimated at around 25 percent. SMER has expanded its youthful base to include a more diverse but also more reliable constituency: former HZDS and SDL supporters, older and middle aged groups, etc. According to polls, 36 percent of SMER voters have firmly decided to vote for SMER, which is slightly more than the average of all political parties. SDKU also has the capacity to gain more in the elections than predicted in polls; the IVO estimate being around 13-15 percent.

COALITION NEGOTIATIONS WIDE OPEN

¶11. (U) The focus of the main political parties and much of the speculation surrounding this election is on post-June 17 coalition negotiations. There are several possible scenarios for post-election developments, but almost anything is possible. Most speculation is based on an estimated election turnout between 50 and 60 percent.

¶12. (SBU) The current coalition partners, SDKU and SMK, together with former coalition member KDH, would like to continue, but polling numbers show that their cumulative support would not give them enough seats to form a government. The sum of preferences for these three party (SDKU + SMK + KDH) according to the latest Focus poll conducted in May, brings a slightly smaller percentage (29.0) than SMER's preferences alone (31.7). Internal disputes and gaps in mutual trust further reduce the likelihood of cooperation. It seems that only the threat of Fico allying with HZDS and SNS might mobilize them to work together. Many speculate that Meciar's HZDS could add to either side the missing seats to complete the 75 that are needed for a majority government.

¶13. (SBU) If the election results look anything like the current polls, SMER will be offered the first chance by President Gasparovic to form a government. Having learned his lesson in the past, Fico has left all options open and has repeatedly refused to name any potential coalition partner, claiming that Slovak citizens will decide at the ballot box. SMER's election results will likely be the biggest factor in coalition negotiations. The lower the percentage, the more likely that SMER will be forced to compromise and form a government with several of the current rightist parties. A Slovak version of Germany's "grand coalition" cannot be ruled out. HZDS is still viewed as an unlikely partner for SMER, though neither party has ruled out potential cooperation.

¶14. (SBU) Although Free Forum (SF) leader Martinakova has

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recently expressed concern over secret talks between SMER, SDKU, and HZDS, her scenario seems to reflect fears of unstable SF voters not showing up rather than a realistic future set-up. Either SMK or SNS, but not both, will likely be a part of any coalition. KSS is the least likely party to

be a part of any coalition.

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